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## Intercultural studies

### European dramaturgy – source for Romanian music: Pascal Bentoiu's operatic trilogy

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#### Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the cultural and temporal relationship between writers and composers inspired by their theatrical works. Therefore, I will approach three of the most important operas of Pascal Bentoiu – one of the greatest Romanian composers – which are based on international-known literary masterpieces. *Amorul doctor* [The Love Doctor] is based on Molière's comedy *L'amour médecin* – which has been recorded by B.B.C and O.R.T.F. *Jertfirea Ifigeniei* [The Sacrifice of Iphigenia] is a radio opera based on Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* – composition that received the „Italia” International Prize of Italian Radio and Television (RAI). *Hamlet* is an opera that synthesizes Shakespeare's drama, and received the international “Guido Valcarengi” Composition Prize. Romanian music, even when approaches international subjects, has its specificity that makes it challenging to examine and to compare with other cultural products of different areas. To emphasize these aspects, I cover several points of view: historical research – the historical and social differences and connections between the music and the original opera –, score analysis and comparative analysis (between the original play and the libretto). To get the general context, we need to understand Pascal Bentoiu's operas place in the Romanian culture. Also, we will draw some general characteristic for Pascal Bentoiu's composition and musical thinking. Studying the original scores, I will uncover leitmotifs, demonstrating how they represent the character, concluding on how a Romanian musician approaches the dramaturgy. I will define a fascinating world we've already known through the literary texts – with a new face – generated by the music of a great composer

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#### Introduction

During its history, Romanian music has developed mostly in two directions: one that follows the path of the Western music and one that uses folklore as a primary source of inspiration. Although at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many composers have reached popularity, George Enescu was the first composer that realized a synthesis between the two currents, including impressionism and modal territories.

Living among great musicians, Pascal Bentoiu grown as a distinguished composer, exceptional thinker and musicologist with a prodigious analytical spirit. He is also an aesthetician, folklorist and enescologist, becoming one of the greatest musicians Romania's ever had. Pascal Bentoiu was born in Bucharest in 1927. Composer of the highly acclaimed *Hamlet* and two other operas, his work includes also eight symphonies, four concertos and a large number of chamber, vocal and incidental music. He was never a party member during the Communist period and he

couldn't enroll at the Music Conservatoire\*. He studied in private with the distinguished composer Mihail Jora. Being a most respected personality, after the 1989 Romanian Revolution he was elected President of the Romanian Composers and Musicologists Society (1990-1992). Due to his perpetual achievements in the artistic field, many academies and societies awarded him over the years.

His music is written with dramatic flair, using a great variety of elements, including melodism, folksong, tape, serialism and modalism. His instrumental and orchestral scores contain a diversity of contemporary techniques, and Bentoïu's work is characterized by rich color, warmth and lyricism.

He wrote over 20 works to accompany the theatrical presentation of plays of Shakespeare, Euripides, Molière, Beaumarchais and other dramatists, being constantly attracted by universal history and philosophy.

- *Amorul doctor* (Dr. Cupid) is based on Molière's comedy *L'amour médecin* – and has been recorded by BBC and O.R.T.F.
- *Hamlet* is an opera that synthesizes Shakespeare's drama, and received the international "Guido Valcarenghi" (Ricordi) Composition Prize.
- *Jertfirea Ifigeniei* (The Sacrifice of Iphigenia) is a radio opera based on Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* – composition that received the „Italia" International Prize of Italian Radio and Television (RAI).

We will go through them and uncover their dramaturgy, observing how leitmotifs represent the roles. While discovering the connections between the character and its music, we will reveal the links between French, Greek, English and Romanian literature and music.

## DR. CUPID

Inspired by Molière's theatrical piece, this opera bouffe in one act (op. 15) was written in 1963, and it had the world premiere in Bucharest, in 1966. The libretto was written by the composer himself.

Pascal Bentoïu follows the subject drawn by Molière's comedy, with a few modifications, due to musical criteria (ex. - four doctors instead of five, for the symmetry of the phrase construction). Thereby, the cast consists of: Sganarelle (bass), Lucinda – Sganarelle's daughter (light soprano), Lorenzo/Clitandro – Lucinda's lover (light tenor), Lisetta – Lucinda's maid (soprano), four doctors (a tenor, two baritones and a bass), the notary (bass), musicians and dancers. The action takes place in Paris, in Sganarelle's home.

The music of the opera is colorful and witty. It abounds with vivacity, congruence and lyricism, while going along with the plot, which is distributed in 12 scenes. The orchestration is not intricate, and it fully commits the instrumentalists in following the score in its diversity of dynamics and the rhythmical carousel.

Sganarelle's interventions portray a stubborn, penny-pinching man, who has been grounded-down by the circumstances of life – the melodic profile is sinuous and the voice is grave. His intervention in the 8<sup>th</sup> Scene with the citation of the melody *Valencia* represents a moment of clumsy melodicism that is actually built to reveal his forgotten benevolence. His only reason of living is his daughter, Lucinda. She is "in sorrow and melancholia" (1<sup>st</sup> Scene) and her father would do anything to make her happy; anything but accepting her only wish: to get married.

The most surprising character is Lisetta, the maid. She has no rights in the house, she has no benefits from planning the trick on her master, but she exposes herself to many risks for helping her young mistress. She becomes the key that opens everyone's hearts, knowing their deepest confidences, becoming the midpoint of the opera. Her *Airs* are highly melodic, emphasizing her important part in solving sentimental circumstances. She will be the one that argues with Sganarelle, trying to prove him wrong; she gathers along "the doctors", planning it all. And that is because whenever she sees "two young hearts in love" she "must lead their steps and guide"<sup>†</sup>.

Lucinda's melodic structure builds a character that is introverted, but has pure and strong feelings. Her only wish is to be with the young man she loves, Lorenzo, although they "could not speak but with their eyes"<sup>‡</sup>. Her

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\* Students were admitted to higher education institutions only after their political and social background was thoroughly analysed. Being son of a reputed lawyer and former Ministry of Justice during royalty period, Bentoïu was denied enrolment to the Conservatory.

<sup>†</sup> *Amorul doctor* (Dr. Cupid), libretto, Scene 7

<sup>‡</sup> *Idem*, Scene 10

interventions become more significant when she finally addresses her lover. Their duet makes a moment of high lyricism and the orchestration follows them through their dialogue.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> scene (bar 73), Lorenzo/Clitandro appears. The lover, who is as clever as Lisetta, manages to trick the old man with his Latin vocabulary standing for medical terms. Sganarelle doesn't seem to be disturbed by the ridiculous situation, but appreciate Clitandro for his wisdom and expertise.

The four doctors' intervention represents the climax of the comedy (scena), by confusion, ignorance, pride, absurdity of situation. Their appearances are emphasized by interventions of the orchestra – comical punctuations of their reverences. Their quartet is built on polyphonic grounds, a dissonant, chaotic fugue.

As we see here and next in the two operas analyzed below, the orchestral background always follows the musical discourse. What makes Pascal Bentoiu's compositions distinctive is that they are absolutely harmonious in their dissonances; absolutely harmonious in their polyphony; absolutely harmonious in their diversity of timbre. He created new metaphors using well-known subjects (literary myths), well-known techniques, familiar instruments and standard vocal approach.

## HAMLET

*Dr. Cupid* contrasts *Hamlet* not only through the subject but also through the compositional techniques Pascal Bentoiu uses.

This dramatic opera's world premiere took place in Marseilles, France, in April 1974. The Romanian premiere took place in September 1975, at the Bucharest National Opera.

The music in *Hamlet* is much more dissonant compared to its predecessor. The Prelude (which replaces the Overture) is unique, written for a cappella mixed choir. It takes the auditorium into a different world: darker, more tensioned, full of veiled feelings. Composer's intentions in this drama were "to give something else, other shapes and dimensions."<sup>§</sup>

In his two acts score, Pascal Bentoiu massively converts the Shakespearian text. Having the power to visualize sounds and having literary mastermind, he developed a text that brings in an innovative fiction. It is more compact, extracting essences, re-creating them, to obtain music drama<sup>\*\*</sup>. "The main guidelines are still there but they are systematized and almost abstract. The music comes in trying to recreate – if it can – the poetry, psychological depth, and dramatic discourse, human and philosophical connotations."<sup>††</sup>

Hamlet, the main character of this opera, is a lyric tenor. Its melodic structure is created to emphasize the inner complexity that calls for a high vocal technique, doubled by intellectual and artistiques potentials. He acts by himself, having no trusted friends.

"The spectrum" is also the tenor's voice, distorted through speakers. Musically, "the spectrum" is mirrored against Hamlet's motif. The whispers of the spectrum are designed in sinuous splitted phrases. "The spectrum" has a major importance, with many interventions.

Ophelia's score is created for soprano voice. It is characterized by mobility and melodic exposé. Her melodic profile is dominated by the "singing-speaking" manner, differing from the Shakespearian presentation of Ophelia speaking melodically.

Claudius' role (bass) is aimed in multiple separate sequences, the king being cold-hearted, malicious and reckless.

Gertrude's (mezzosoprano) character is already outlined by the stories related in previous scenes, though her role begins in 3<sup>rd</sup> Scene.

Laertes (bariton) is searching for the truth and for the one that killed his father. His impulsive personality is musically embodied through rough sonorities, sharp contours and strong-minded rhythms.

Osrick's character (baritone) has been sketched as artificial, vain and double-dealer. He is the judge of the fight in the 10<sup>th</sup> scene. He has an essential role, being interconnected with other characters.

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<sup>§</sup> Pascal Bentoiu, *Hamlet*, Brochure of Bucharest Romanian Opera

<sup>\*\*</sup> Alexandru-Radu Petrescu, From dramatic theatre directing to the musical theatre directing (abstract)

<sup>††</sup> *Idem* 3

The large-scale orchestra has a key role: it comments, shaping the tension. The percussion fugue in 3<sup>rd</sup> Scene is a unique moment in the operatic area that figures a page of unusual force and expressivity.

*Hamlet* became one of the crucial stage compositions in Romanian music. It has an unparalleled powerful dramatic expression. It is well balanced in musically revealing the characters, thus being considered one of Pascal Bentoiu's most important compositions.

## THE SACRIFICE OF IPHIGENIA

*The Sacrifice of Iphigenia* is the first Romanian radio-opera, and it has many distinctive features. Its premiere took place in 1968, released through the Romanian Broadcasting Company. It has been written shortly after *Dr. Cupid*, but it treats a completely different subject by a distinct musical approach. The libretto has been written by the composer too, as in the two operas mentioned above, inspired of course by Euripides' play. Pascal Bentoiu uses few fragments of the original text, using it only as a basis to portray the characters in an innovative manner, through the music.

In a radio opera the music has to be most expressive, as there is no staging and the acting is not visible. Rather surprisingly, the composer points out two instruments: the organ and the percussion. But these instruments offer an incredibly large variety of sound images, having a convincing force of transmitting messages and an unanticipated diversity.

The music points out two levels (that correspond with the two scenes): first static and next progressive. Thus, the composer enhances the musical idea of conflicts between life/death and duty/aspiration. The modern modal universe remotely reminds us of the Ancient Greek. The counterpoint, the extension of the chromatic towards serialism brings us into the more sophisticated 20<sup>th</sup> century musical language.

The music gains many nuances, through the special effects available in the recording-studio. However, Pascal Bentoiu doesn't use them in excess or as a goal. He is able to maintain the balance (here, as in the two operas analyzed beyond), using the special effects only to magnificently highlight the musical image.

The opera has two main characters, Iphigenia and Agamemnon, who are joined by a female choir.

Agamemnon's performer is an actor – surprisingly, because of being invisible to the public. However, his acting is not at the corporal level but evolves on the path of vocal variety, being the lyrical expression of troubling tensions.

Iphigenia's role is a special one. That is because she is presented by two players: an actress (that performs the declaimed part) and a soprano. The two facets are growing separately to the final scene (when walking to the sacrifice), where she duplicates herself, simultaneously singing and declaiming, accompanied by the female choir.

The choir has a quite important role, guiding the auditorium through the whole action. The composer himself gives us an example saying: "the choir laments Iphigenia, but it does not actually speaking, but vocalizes a song, because the words would not be necessary."<sup>††</sup>

Listening to the score for the first time, we might be tempted to consider it as one with a music that's too modern for its subject. At a second look we will observe that, more than representing the antique subject in a new light, Pascal Bentoiu makes a synthesis. Combining old and new compositional techniques, integrating the actual acting with operatic manner of singing, reducing the number of instruments and characters to the two most important, the composer draws new boundaries of melodicism, without spoiling its reason to exist. And that makes this quite unusual opera to be considered one of the most valuable lyrical versions of "Iphigenia in Aulis".

## Resources

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<sup>††</sup> Extract from Constantin Razvan's interview with Pascal Bentoiu, in the "Music in the Present" show, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1968 – citation in *Introduction into the contemporary opera*, Doru Popovici

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